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SUBJECT: HUNGARY'S ELECTIONS: ANALYST SEES CHIEF OPPOSITION
PARTY AS UNLIKELY TO WIN ELECTION (C-RE6-00145)

REF: A. STATE 22644

[1](#)B. BUDAPEST 733

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) Policy research institute "Political Capital"
Director Krisztian Szabados offered April 10 some thoughts on
the April 9 first round of the elections and what they
portend for round two on April 23:

-- the three round-one winners were the governing MSZP with
more absolute votes than FIDESZ, its junior coalition partner
SZDSZ, which did better than expected, and the junior
opposition party MDF, which surprised everyone by polling
more than five percent to remain in Parliament;

-- MDF, whose campaign "Political Capital" had managed, would
not agree to cooperate with FIDESZ;

-- FIDESZ's campaign had been technically well run, but
poorly conceived. Its U.S. campaign managers had misjudged
the nature of the Hungarian electorate;

-- MSZP had both managed to provide critical support to its
coalition partner SZDSZ and, unlike in 2002, alone collect
more votes than FIDESZ. With the first round, Prime Minister
Gyurcsany had consolidated his hold on the party and "put an
end to the Kadar era," i.e., the popular expectation that the
government will meet all of its population's needs;

-- A victory April 23 would give the MSZP a "mandate" to
introduce austerity measures.

FIDESZ Facing Uphill Battle

[1](#)2. (SBU) Policy research institute "Political Capital"
Director Krisztian Szabados April 10 offered his thoughts on
the results of the April 9, first round of Hungary's
parliamentary elections. (Note: The April 9 contest saw the
governing MSZP-SZDSZ coalition more than hold its own --ref
b-- against chief opposition party FIDESZ, which now faces an
uphill battle to unseat Prime Minister Gyurcsany and his
team. After being written off by polling companies and
observers here, the junior opposition party MDF clawed its
way back into Parliament, while junior governing coalition
party SZDSZ also crossed the five percent threshold to
another four years on Hungary's political center stage.)

MDF Returns to the Fray

¶3. (SBU) Szabados saw "three winners" of the April 9 first round:

- MSZP which, unlike in 2002, this time had alone received more votes than FIDESZ;
- SZDSZ which, to the surprise of all, had won a solid 6.5 percent of the popular vote;
- MDF, which against odds had returned to Parliament.

Szabados noted as a footnote that this election round had seen significantly fewer "lost votes," i.e., votes cast for parties that did not make it into Parliament, than in 2002: 3 percent on April 9 vice 11 percent four years ago.

¶4. (SBU) Szabados, whose "Political Capital" had designed MDF's ultimately successful campaign, described the party as deriving its support in this election equally from left and right. This meant, he said, that even if MDF ultimately decided to throw its support to FIDESZ, much of its electorate would not follow. (Note: although Szabados claimed he had "research" to prove his contention, it seems unlikely that a significant number of left voters would support the conservative MDF. When approached after his presentation, Szabados contended that those "left" voters who had supported MDF did so out of a disinterested desire to see a legitimate right-wing party well established in Hungary. This seems counterintuitive.) Later in his presentation, Szabados categorically excluded the possibility of a FIDESZ-MDF compact. MDF President Ibolya David had told him April 10 that she would not cut a deal with FIDESZ, "even if they offered me the UN."

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FIDESZ's Strategy, Mistakes

¶5. (SBU) Szabados predicted that FIDESZ would use the time between rounds of the election --the second round will occur April 23-- to stoke the emotions of the electorate, run a strongly negative campaign, and allege electoral fraud, as it did in 2002. He expected MSZP to keep the pressure on FIDESZ this time around, however, and he pointed to the early evening April 10 MSZP rally in downtown Budapest as proof. (It has been alleged that MSZP had been too passive in similar circumstances in 2002.) Szabados also claimed that the FIDESZ cadres were exhausted. He pointed to FIDESZ candidate and campaign manager Antal Rogan and spokesman Peter Szijjarto, whose were visibly fatigued when shown on television late April 9, as examples.

¶6. (SBU) Szabados laid much of the blame for FIDESZ's failure at the feet of its American campaign advisers, whom he described as "stupid" and "detached from reality." In his telling, FIDESZ had adopted a campaign strategy similar to that used by the Polish Law and Justice Party and the U.S. Republican Party; but the success of both strategies was contingent on the existence of a religious right, and "Hungary is not a religious country." Later in his presentation, noting that Hungary is, however, a "macho" country, Szabados contended that Prime Minister Gyurcsany had "humiliated" Orban in their April 5 debate. He recalled that Orban had spent much of that contest staring into the camera, instead of confronting Gyurcsany directly. That failure to become combative with Gyurcsany had cost Orban the vote of some of Hungary's male voters, Szabados thought. Szabados believed that FIDESZ's earlier efforts to court voters from the left had been similarly unsuccessful. "(FIDESZ President Viktor) Orban is just not credible with the left," he contended.

¶7. (SBU) Szabados commended FIDESZ's technical administration of its election. Its large-scale door-to-door campaigning

and telephone call banks were new in Hungary, but not enough for an electorate "in no mood to change governments."

¶8. (SBU) Asked what the future held for Orban, should FIDESZ lose this election, Szabados predicted that Orban would resign, but that he could return to politics within two years. A loss, he thought, would offer MDF an ideal opportunity to build a genuine, conservative party. It was possible that an alliance with the Christian Democrats, now cooperating with FIDESZ could be arranged.

MSZP Turns the Corner

¶9. (SBU) Szabados believed that MSZP had engineered 70 thousand "tactical" votes for SZDSZ to ensure that the Free Democrats would make it into Parliament. That, he asserted, had accounted for SZDSZ's improved showing in Budapest. With this election, Szabados said MSZP had ended the Kadar era in Hungary. FIDESZ's strategy had been "pragmatic." It had asked voters what they wanted --increased pensions, more roads, etc.-- then promised it to them. Gyurcsany, in contrast, had addressed the electorate as adults; aware that each new program came with a price tag. The response on election day suggested he had largely succeeded with his message, and his success had changed the MSZP.

¶10. (SBU) Gyurcsany's success had registered, Szabados thought, on the MSZP's old guard. He described the MSZP's Imre Szekeres and Katalin Szili dogging Gyurcsany around the MSZP's campaign nerve center the evening of April 9. Still, he thought the party remains potentially fractious, and suggested that a slim majority in Parliament could continue to be an important source of external discipline.

¶11. (SBU) Although the MSZP and the SZDSZ had quickly agreed on a joint strategy for round two of the elections, Szabados did not exclude difficult inter-party relations as a government was being formed. SZDSZ Minister of Education Balint Magyar had been "the first minister sacked during a campaign debate," he said, referring to Gyurcsany's comment in his April 5 debate with Orban. (Gyurcsany said, "We need a Socialist minister of education...") That could set the stage for tough inter-party bargaining to come.

¶12. (SBU) Victory April 23 would give Gyurcsany a mandate to introduce austerity measures, Szabados thought. It was likely the Prime Minister would opt for a "stealth austerity package." Immediate, very public cuts would jeopardize

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MSZP's performance in the all-important October local elections, and that could not be tolerated.

¶13. (SBU) In the only comment with a foreign policy component, Szabados alleged that the pre-election visit to Hungary by Russian President Putin had registered positively in rural Hungary, where farmers see Russia as an export market for their produce. Both Gyurcsany and MSZP President Hiller had exploited the Russia angle effectively during the campaign, he thought, asking audiences in rural Hungary, "Who is the real patriot? The party that gets Hungarian goods to Russian markets."

Comment

¶14. (SBU) Time will tell if Szabados's day-after predictions about round two and analysis of round one are accurate, but it is clear that the April 9 results represent a setback for FIDESZ; one that it will be difficult for the party to recover from in the less than two weeks remaining until round two.

¶15. (U) Visit Embassy Budapest's classified website:
www.state.sgov/gov/p/eur/budapest/index.cfm
WALKER